

# JOHN ADAMS

*The Second  
President  
of the United  
States.*

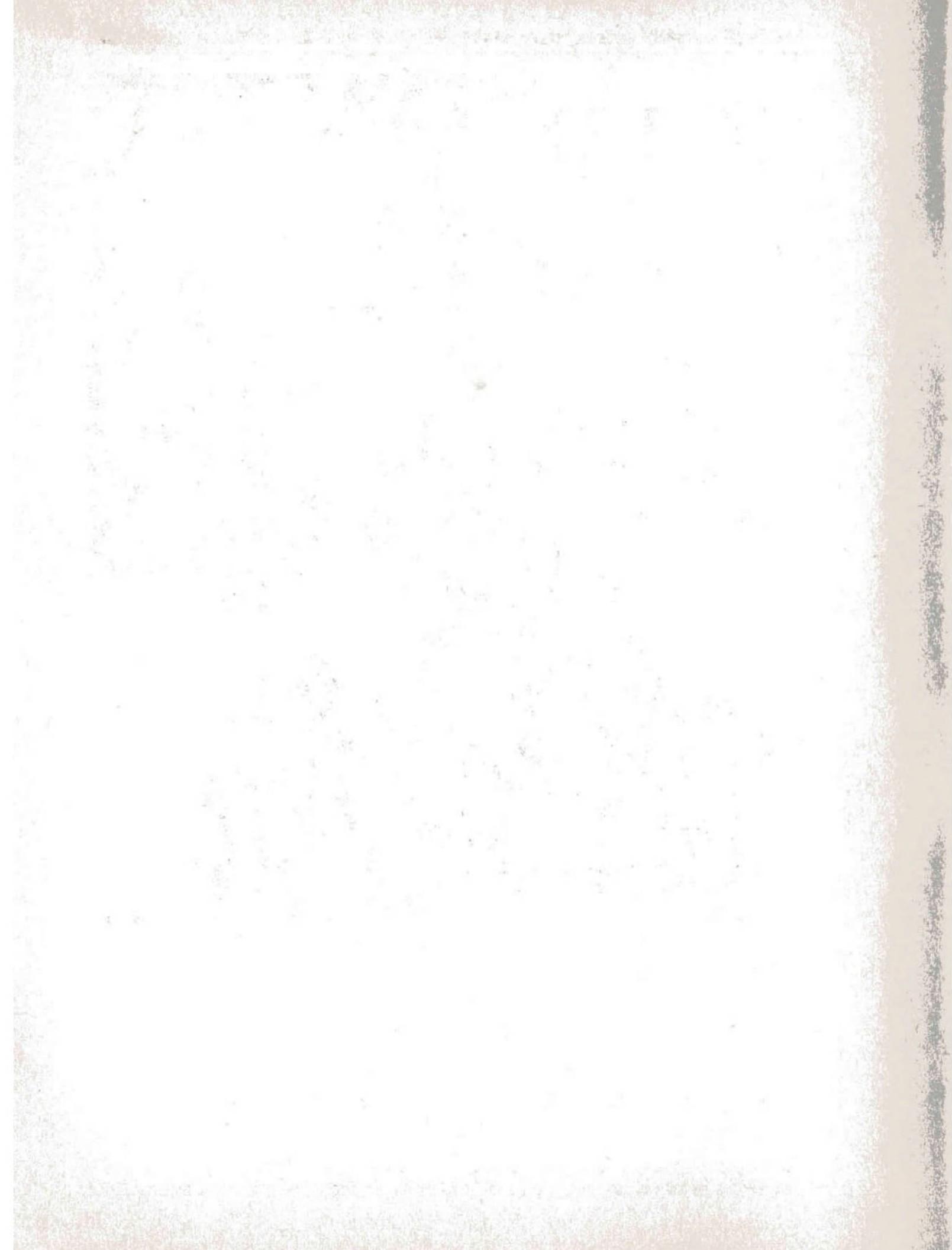


**Planning for Independence**

**John Adams and John Hancock, Leaders in the Fight for Liberty**

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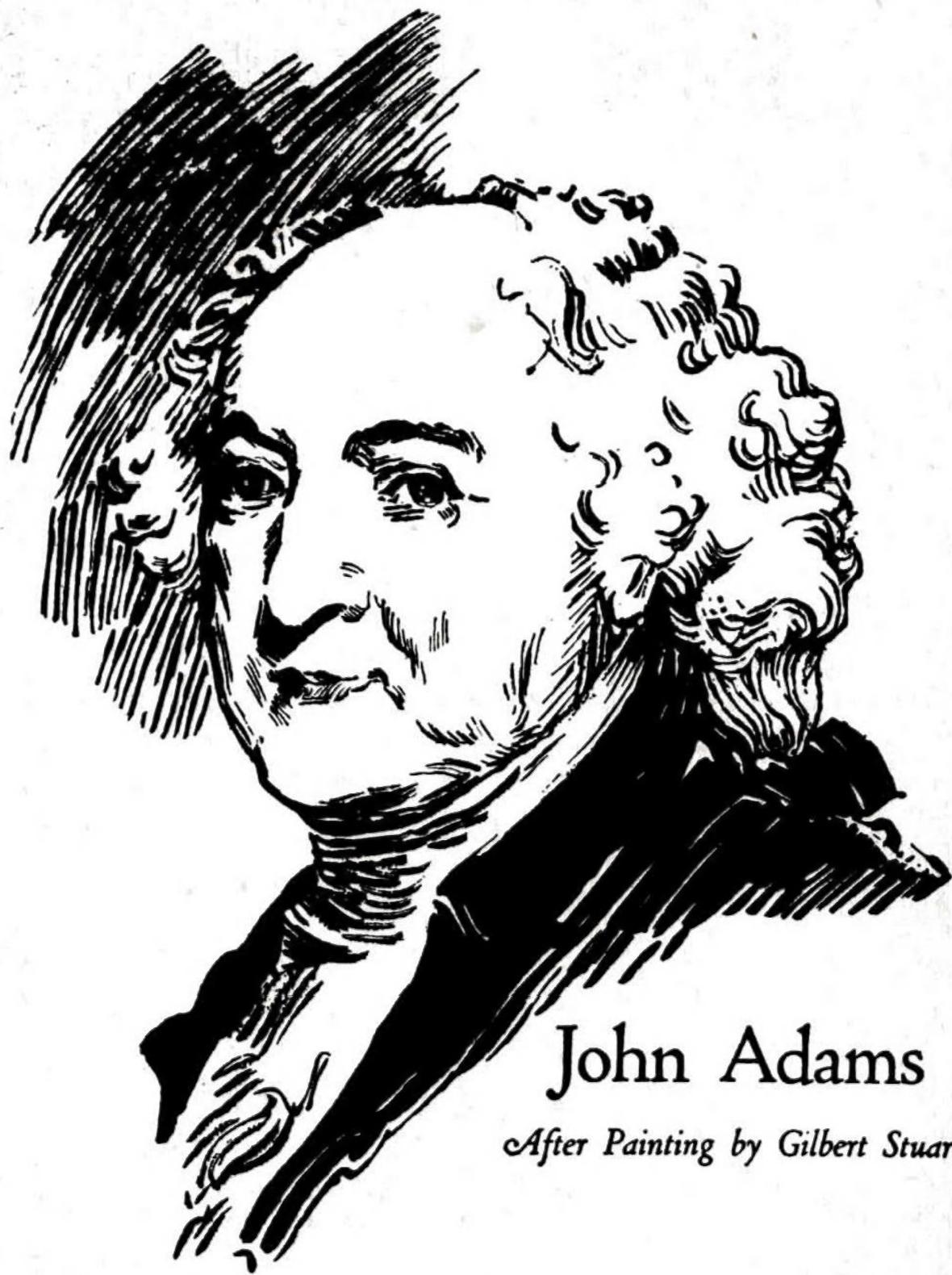
*Second President of the  
United States*



"**J**OHN ADAMS had a conspicuous place among those who builded a great nation, made it free, and formed governments for it which seem destined to endure for ages."—Mellen Chamberlain.

Presented by





John Adams

*After Painting by Gilbert Stuart*

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# JOHN ADAMS

## *Second President of the United States*

THE name Adams is an illustrious one in American history; for three members of that family attained to great national prominence: Samuel Adams, "The Father of American Independence," John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States, and John Adams, the brilliant lawyer, great statesman, fearless diplomat, and second President of the United States.



**YOUTH** Three generations of the Adams family had lived in America before John Adams was born on October 19, 1735; so that he was in every sense of the word a native American. His father, John Adams, Senior, was a thrifty New England farmer. The Adams homestead at Braintree, Massachusetts (now a part of Quincy), where John Adams, Junior, was born and reared, was not unlike many other New England homesteads. The hard life of toil, and even privation, common to the sons of New England, bred in them thrift, fortitude, and independence; and John Adams was in all these qualities a true son of New England.

Of his boyhood, little is known. He received sufficient education to enable him to enter Harvard College, from which he was graduated in 1755. How good a student he was, it is difficult to tell; because at that time the graduates of Harvard were ranked according to family instead of scholarship. He must have been a student of some ability; for in his later study of law he shows a remarkable power of application and assimilation—a power that must have been developed in his college course.

Upon his graduation from college, Adams was faced with the necessity of choosing a profession. His mind was not made up at once; but as he had to make a living for himself, he obtained the position of Master of the grammar school at Worcester, where he went to assume his duties in the summer of 1755. During the year of teaching, he came to a decision in regard to a profession. In

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spite of much remonstrance from his relatives, who felt that the church was a much higher calling, he determined to enter the law.

In August, 1756, John Adams began the study of law under the direction of Mr. Putnam. After two years of study, he was ready to enter upon practice; and on November 6, 1758, he was admitted to the Massachusetts bar. Upon this occasion Jeremiah Gridley, the recognized leader of the colonial bar, gave this sound advice to Adams: "Pursue the study of the law rather than the gain of it"—a piece of excellent counsel that Adams followed throughout his career at the bar.

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**LAWYER** As a lawyer, Adams was a conspicuous success. His natural endowments were of the best for the profession he had chosen. He was honest, trustworthy, and industrious; he had a well-trained and brilliant mind, and a determination to succeed; all of which combined to make of him an excellent lawyer, as it later made of him an admirable statesman.

The colonies were entering upon the most turbulent period of their history at the same time that John Adams was entering upon his profession. It was inevitable that he should be a patriot. He was not old enough at this early date to be a leader; but in 1761, three years after he was admitted to the bar, Adams became an unwavering supporter of the "Liberty party." It was in that year that Otis delivered his famous argument against the *Writs of Assistance*; and John Adams, hearing that stirring speech, went away fired with patriotic ardor. He afterwards wrote:

"American Independence was then and there born . . . Every man of an immense, crowded audience appeared to me to go away, as I did, ready to take arms against writs of assistance. Then and there was the first scene of the first act of opposition to the arbitrary claims of Great Britain. Then and there the child of Independence was born. In fifteen years, i.e., in 1776, he grew up to manhood and declared himself free."

Though his heart was in the cause of liberty and his mind was made up as to its justice, Adams did not yet enter upon public service in its behalf. He continued his occupation at the bar, traveling from place to place in the colony; it was the custom for the lawyers of that period, as well as for the judges, to "ride the circuit" over the entire province, regardless of where their homes

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might be. In addition to the practice of law, which kept him much away from home, Adams did not forget Gridley's advice, but studied much, and to such good advantage that he became in a few years a recognized leader at the Massachusetts bar. His *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, written during this period, is still recognized as a sound legal study. Thus was he fitting himself for the part he was to play in the great struggle which had even then begun.

On October 25, 1764, he married Abigail Smith, a woman of unusually fine mind and noble character. It was a singularly happy union, for Mrs. Adams was as zealous a patriot as John Adams, and her constancy to the cause gave him added courage in the many severe trials through which he passed. "Not often does fate allot to a great man a domestic partner so fit to counsel and sustain as was Abigail Adams, whose memory deserves to be, as indeed it still is, held in high esteem and admiration."

The *Stamp Act* of 1765 brought John Adams into prominence as a leader in the cause of liberty. The colonies refused to buy or use the stamps, and as a result no business of any kind could be transacted. Adams in his diary says, "The probate office is shut, the custom house is shut, the courts of justice are shut, and all business seems at a stand."

The town of Boston prepared in town meeting a petition to the governor of the province and his council, to remove the stamp tax so that the colonists could resume their occupations. The three ablest lawyers of the colony were appointed to argue the petition before the governor: James Otis, Jeremiah Gridley, and, side by side with these elders, John Adams, who had just reached his thirtieth year. His appointment was an honor as unexpected as it was great; for Adams was not at this time a resident of Boston, but of Braintree. Furthermore, he had less than a day in which to prepare; and he felt that the test was severe. He accepted, however, and in his argument against the *Stamp Act*, he voiced "the one sufficient and unanswerable statement of the colonial position from that time forth to the day of Independence—the injustice and unlawfulness of



Lawyer

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legislation, especially for taxation, over persons not represented in the legislature."

The part he played in the *Stamp Act* proceedings made Adams a colonial leader, second only to such older men as Otis, Samuel Adams, and Hancock.

He removed from Braintree to Boston in 1768, having purchased a house in Brattle Square. Two years later he was elected to the General Court as one of the Boston representatives. This was not his first political position, for he had been a selectman in his native town of Braintree. His health, which seems always to have been a cause of concern, forced him to return to his home in Braintree within a year, so that he could not be returned to the General Court as Boston's representative for another term. Adams was never an office seeker. He served when it seemed his duty to do so, but he preferred to carry on his law practice and live quietly with his family. The affairs of the nation, however, compelled the attention and the service of the ablest men of the colonies; and Adams found himself, in 1774, when he was elected to the First Continental Congress, called into a life of public service which he never left until he stepped down from the president's chair in 1801.



### CONTINENTAL CONGRESS With Samuel Adams, Thomas Cushing, and

Robert Treat Paine, John Adams set out on August 10, 1774, for the First Continental Congress, called to meet in Philadelphia, on September fifth, for the purpose of considering what measures of united action the colonies could take against Great Britain.

The journey of the Massachusetts delegation was a triumphal march. Adams wrote to his wife:

"I have not time nor language to express the hospitality and the studied, expensive respect with which we have been treated in every stage of our progress."

But the First Congress was a disappointment to John Adams. He had firmly made up his mind that half-way measures could accomplish nothing. He had even gone so far in a private communication as to advise, "Let our people drill and lay in military stores, but let them avoid war if possible,—if possible, I say!" But

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such strong measures were not to be expected from the First Continental Congress, which advised merely that the colonies unite in refusing to trade with the Mother Country. One thing brought about by this Congress was a bond of unity between the colonies which made later united action much more possible; and in creating that bond of unity John Adams and his colleagues from Massachusetts had a large share. Prior to the Congress, Massachusetts had been regarded with a great deal of distrust by some of the other colonies, who feared that the New England province was too radical. Having been warned of this fact, the Massachusetts delegation set about to overcome this prejudice; and so well did they succeed that in the Second Congress, John Hancock, a Massachusetts man, was elected President of the Congress.

Before the Second Congress met, in May, 1775, the war which Adams had foreseen had actually begun. The battle of Lexington and Concord proved to John Adams that the only road to colonial victory lay in a declaration of independence.

Years afterwards, in his *Autobiography*, Adams expressed his early convictions in regard to some definite plan for the establishment of this independence: "I thought the first step ought to be to recommend to the people of all the states to institute governments for themselves, under their own authority, and that without loss of time; that we ought to declare the colonies free, sovereign and independent states."

But even yet, with war an accomplished fact in New England, Congress was not ready for so decisive a step. The Congress opened with the same half-way measures which had so disgusted Adams in the previous session. Another petition was sent to George the Third! There was much talk, but little action, a state of affairs that Adams never liked. Throughout his entire career, he *acted* when he had fully made up his mind that action was necessary. To others he left diplomacy and political pussyfooting; he struck when he felt that he must strike, rather than when he knew the iron was hot enough to insure success. This trait was both his strength and his weakness,—his strength as a statesman, his weakness as a politician.

The army of *Minute-Men* before Boston was not an accredited army; it belonged to no recognized government; and Adams determined that Congress should adopt this as the colonial army, and should appoint for it a commander-in-chief. He could get little

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encouragement for his project in private interviews, arguments, and appeals to individual members of the Congress. One morning in June, 1775, he announced to Samuel Adams that he had resolved to take a step which would compel the delegates "to declare themselves for or against *something*." "I am determined this morning," he said, "to make a motion that Congress should adopt the army before Boston, and appoint Colonel Washington Commander of it!"

True to his word, Adams rose at the opening of the session and made the motion. Congress was, as he had foreseen, shocked into action; and on June 17, 1775, Adams was able to write in triumph to his wife, "I can now inform you that the Congress have made choice of the modest and virtuous, the amiable, generous, and brave George Washington, Esquire, to be General of the American army. This appointment will have a great effect in cementing and securing the union of these colonies."

How fully justified he was in this belief, is a matter of history. One of the most important moves toward the ultimate union of the colonies was made when the great soldier from Virginia took command of the band of New England *Minute-Men* in Cambridge on July 2, 1775. To John Adams belongs at least a major portion of the honor of selecting the one man in America who could and did bring the war of the Revolution to a successful close.



**INDEPENDENCE** The year of 1775 dragged on without a definite declaration of freedom from Great Britain. Of course, Congress, by the appointment of George Washington as the Commander-in-chief of the army in New England, had committed itself and the colonies to a state of war against England; but the Congress did not, during that year, declare the American colonies to be a free and independent country. John Adams, with characteristic impatience at delay, stood out openly for immediate declaration of independence. He attempted first to secure the adoption of a foreign policy looking toward an alliance with France, and second to have Congress get together a navy so that the war might be carried to the British stronghold, the sea. The second proposition passed, but the first met with defeat in spite of the eloquence of Adams in its support. "I was remarkably cool and, for me, unusually eloquent," he says, in reporting his part in the

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debate. "On no occasion, before or after, did I ever make a greater impression on Congress."

He returned home for a short visit on December 9, 1775, to attend to personal business, confer with leaders at home, and visit his family. He had lately been appointed Chief Justice of the province, an honor which he now accepted under the provision that it was not to interfere with his services to the country. While at home, he found that the people of his colony were fully ready for the step which he had so long attempted to make Congress take. Returning to Congress late in January, 1776, he was more firmly resolved than ever to do his utmost for independence.

For five months the issue was undecided, and for five months John Adams labored for the cause which he now saw must soon come to issue. On February 11, he wrote to his wife:

"In this or a similar condition we shall remain, I think, until late in the spring, when some critical event will take place; perhaps sooner. But the Arbiter of events, the Sovereign of the world, only knows which way the torrent will be turned. Judging by experience, by probabilities, and by all appearances, I conclude it will roll on to dominion and glory, though the circumstances and consequences may be bloody."

In this forecast he was entirely right; for on June 7 Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced his famous *Lee Resolves* which declared that "These colonies are, and of a right ought to be free and independent." John Adams seconded Lee's motion; and a furious debate ensued. Final action on the *Resolves* was delayed until July 1; though seven colonies were prepared to vote for the motion, unanimous action might be secured with the delay. A committee, including Jefferson, Franklin, and John Adams, was appointed to draw up a declaration of independence.

Jefferson, as chairman of the committee, wrote the document which dissolved the "political bonds" that bound America to Great Britain. Adams, to whom Jefferson sent the manuscript of the *Declaration*, was delighted with its "high tone and flights of oratory."



*In Congress*

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On July 1, 1776, the *Lee Resolves* came up for final action in Congress, and after a day of debate were passed on July 2. The *Declaration* was then reported and debated until late on July 4. Furiously attacked by those who still clung to the delusion that peace lay in some other direction, the *Declaration* demanded the best defence from its supporters. Jefferson, who was never a debater, sat uncomfortably silent while the conflict raged. Upon John Adams fell the responsibility of leading the defence. "His intense earnestness, his familiarity with every possible argument, compelled him to be magnificently eloquent." Jefferson afterwards bore witness to the fact that Adams was "the Colossus of that debate."

Late in the afternoon of July 4, the *Declaration of Independence* came to vote, was passed, signed by John Hancock, the President of the Congress, and the other members, and was published to the world.

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**DIPLOMATIC SERVICE** Much more than the mere adoption of the *Declaration* was needed, however, to make of the colonies a new and independent nation. The document, great and important as it was, was merely the statement of the aim, the desire, the determination of the colonies to become the sovereign country of the United States of America. Before they could be that sovereign country in the eyes of the world, they must accomplish at least three things: first, they must win the war against Great Britain; second, they must establish a firm and responsible government at home; and third, they must secure recognition of that government from the other countries of the world. It was to the last of these duties that John Adams was called.

For over a year after the *Declaration* was adopted, John Adams remained in Congress, giving his best services to the formation of the confederation of the states, and to the carrying on of the war. He was, in fact, the Chairman of the War Committee. But in November, 1777, weary from ceaseless toil, and threatened again with poor health, he resigned and set out for home.

Scarcely had he reached there when he was notified of his appointment as commissioner to the court of France. He accepted, and on February 13, 1778, he set sail in the frigate *Boston*, accompanied by his son, John Quincy Adams. After an exciting voyage, in which the *Boston* was chased by an English man-of-war, they landed in

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France, where Adams joined Franklin and Lee, who had been for some time in France.

His services here were chiefly concerned with straightening out tangled money matters. He found that the American Mission had kept little or no account of the sums borrowed nor of the disposition of funds; and he made it his duty to introduce order and system into the Mission's accounting. But these were affairs not to his liking; and, as he felt that one commissioner in France could do more than three, he wrote to his kinsman, Samuel Adams, stating this feeling. Samuel Adams brought the matter before Congress, and that body acted upon the suggestion, leaving Benjamin Franklin as the sole envoy to France.

After much delay, Adams reached home on August 2, 1779, feeling that his journey had been rather useless. But that was not strictly so; for he had been instrumental in straightening out a complicated and tangled situation in France; and, further, he had gained experience that was to be very valuable to him in his future diplomatic labor.

Three months at home, and he was again appointed to a Foreign Mission. This time he was selected to treat with England for peace, as soon as that country was ready for such action. The month of November found him again on the sea, bound for France, where he was to wait for further instructions. The diplomatic negotiations proceeded so slowly that Adams, always impatient at delay, determined to accomplish something, while waiting, that would be of service to his country. Accordingly, he set out, on July 27, 1780, for Holland, where the United States had no minister. He hoped to borrow money and possibly secure other aid from this country; but he discovered that Holland, ignorant of conditions in America and fearing the wrath of England, would do nothing for him in behalf of his country. With characteristic energy, he set about to change this attitude. Writing, talking, publishing, and scattering in every way information concerning the United States, he began to prepare the way for the bold diplomatic move which won recognition of the new country from Holland.



*The Peace Treaty*

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Early in 1781, Adams received authority from Congress to act as Minister to Holland. His request for recognition of the United States as a free and independent country, and of himself as the accredited minister of that country, he presented not in the usual way, through the minister of another country, but directly to the government of Holland. It was a bold stroke, bolder perhaps than that stroke which made Washington Commander of the Continental Army; for here failure would have left no further chance of success, while in Congress, had he failed on his first trial to make Washington Commander, he might easily have tried again with better success.

Fortunately for Adams and for the United States, Holland was soon drawn into the war against Great Britain; and on April 19, 1782, Holland recognized the United States and accepted John Adams as the minister of the new country. For the second time in his career John Adams achieved brilliant success by sudden and decisive, though unconventional action. His victory on this occasion John Adams always considered as the greatest success of his life. Money and help from Holland made victory doubly assured; and there remained only the necessity of securing, in a treaty of peace from England, the rights of sovereignty and freedom which were in fact already won.

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### THE PEACE TREATY

Having finished his business in Holland, Adams proceeded to Paris on October 26, 1782, where he met Jay and Franklin, who were commissioned with him to arrange the terms of peace with England. Negotiations had already been opened when Adams arrived. The British, desiring to concede as little as possible to the victors, held out against the claims advanced for equal rights in the North Atlantic fisheries. Being from New England, Adams knew that any treaty which did not secure these rights to his New England constituents would be looked upon with disfavor. He, therefore, in no uncertain terms, demanded that such a concession was a necessary article of the treaty. He won his point; and the right in these fisheries is still a part of the national property.

Finally, all points being agreed upon, the treaty of peace was signed by Franklin, Jay, and Adams on September 3, 1783, and the war of the American Revolution came to a successful close.

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**MINISTER, GREAT BRITAIN** With the establishment of peace, Adams looked forward to returning to his family within a few months. He was always a man of unusually strong love of home, as his letters to his wife give abundant proof. Never in the long separation from his wife and children was he happy; and now when he was detained in France, first by a serious illness and later by the direction of Congress, he sent for his wife, who arrived, in company with a daughter, in the summer of 1784.

In February, 1785, Adams was appointed to be the first Minister to Great Britain. With his wife and family, Adams proceeded to London to accept the high honor and trust bestowed upon him by his countrymen.

His task at the court of St. James was a difficult one; and his two and one-half years there were far from agreeable. The Old World diplomats looked upon the new nation as an upstart, and treated its representative accordingly. It is greatly to the credit of Adams that he held himself so well in hand, even in the face of open insults, and reflected nothing but honor on his country.

On April 20, 1788, he and his family left England, glad to be out of the rather unpleasant atmosphere. His experience both in England and France was such that he knew the United States could best serve its own interests by allying itself with neither of these countries. In the days of his presidency, this belief showed itself in action, and he was able to keep the United States out of a war which would certainly have ended disastrously.



**VICE-PRESIDENT** George Washington was the logical candidate for the first president under the new Constitution, which had been drawn up and adopted during John Adams's absence. Just so logically was Adams the man for the vice-presidency, and both were so designated by the votes cast in the first presidential election.

The office of vice-president of the United States is not generally considered an important position; for the only duty connected with it is that of presiding over the deliberations of the Senate. Only when that body is equally divided on a question does the vice-

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president cast a vote. But John Adams found himself in possession of greater power than any vice-president has since had; for the Senate of that first administration was almost equally divided between those who believed in a strong central government (the group which later became the Federalist party) and those who held to the doctrine of strong state governments at the expense of the national government (later the Democratic party). John Adams cast the deciding vote no less than twenty times in favor of the first (the Federalist) group.

There were no parties in the sense that we now have them; and Adams voted for the Federalist measures only because he believed in strong centralization, not because he was bound by party ties.

When the second election for president was held in 1792, however, political parties had arisen, and Adams was reëlected to the vice-presidency by the Federalist party.



**PRESIDENT** In the election of 1796, Adams was the presidential candidate of the Federalist party, while Jefferson was the candidate of the Anti-Federalists. Both were men whose services to their country had been of so high an order that either might be said justly to deserve the greatest honor the nation could bestow upon them, and both did eventually receive that honor. In this election, however, the Federalist party was in control, and John Adams became President.

He entered upon his administration at a critical period in American history; for the new country had not yet become powerful enough to be secure from foreign aggression. The French Revolution, moreover, had divided the sentiment of his countrymen to such an extent that no matter what the new President did, he would be deeply criticised by those whose sympathies he disregarded.

At this time the antagonism which had always existed between Adams and Alexander Hamilton reached a point of bitter and at times undignified enmity. Hamilton as leader of the party for which Adams stood, and hating him with all of the force of his impassioned nature, was a disturbing influence throughout Adams's presidency.

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At the very beginning of his administration, Adams was confronted with a delicate situation. France refused to accept the American Minister, General C. C. Pinckney, who had been sent to replace James Monroe. This was ground for breaking diplomatic relations; but Adams, desirous of keeping peace at all costs, sent a commission of three to France for the purpose of arranging matters so that America could be kept out of war.

The commissioners arrived and presented their credentials to Talleyrand, the French Director, who made the infamous proposal that they would be accepted only on payment of a large bribe to the Director and other French officials. This proposal was of course rejected; and later the communications in which it had been proposed were published in America as the "X, Y, Z letters," the real names of the signers having been replaced by those letters. The moment these communications were published there arose a loud cry for immediate war against France. There was, certainly, abundant reason for war against either France or Great Britain; but war against either would have been nothing short of ruinous to the United States. Adams's own party, led by Hamilton, desired war against France, which would involve alliance with Great Britain. But the President had no more love for that country than he had for France; and, in spite of his party's desires, he proceeded to reopen diplomatic negotiations with France.

By this act of conciliation, contrary to the demands of his party, Adams sacrificed his chances for reelection, but he undoubtedly saved the country. It was his third great stroke of courageous statesmanship, comparable to his nomination of Washington as Commander-in-Chief, and to his request of the Holland Government for recognition of the United States.

Politically, John Adams sealed his own death warrant when he refused to go to war with France; for his act split the Federalist party, and it never again elected a president. In the election of 1800, John Adams was defeated for the presidency by Thomas Jefferson.



*The Second President*

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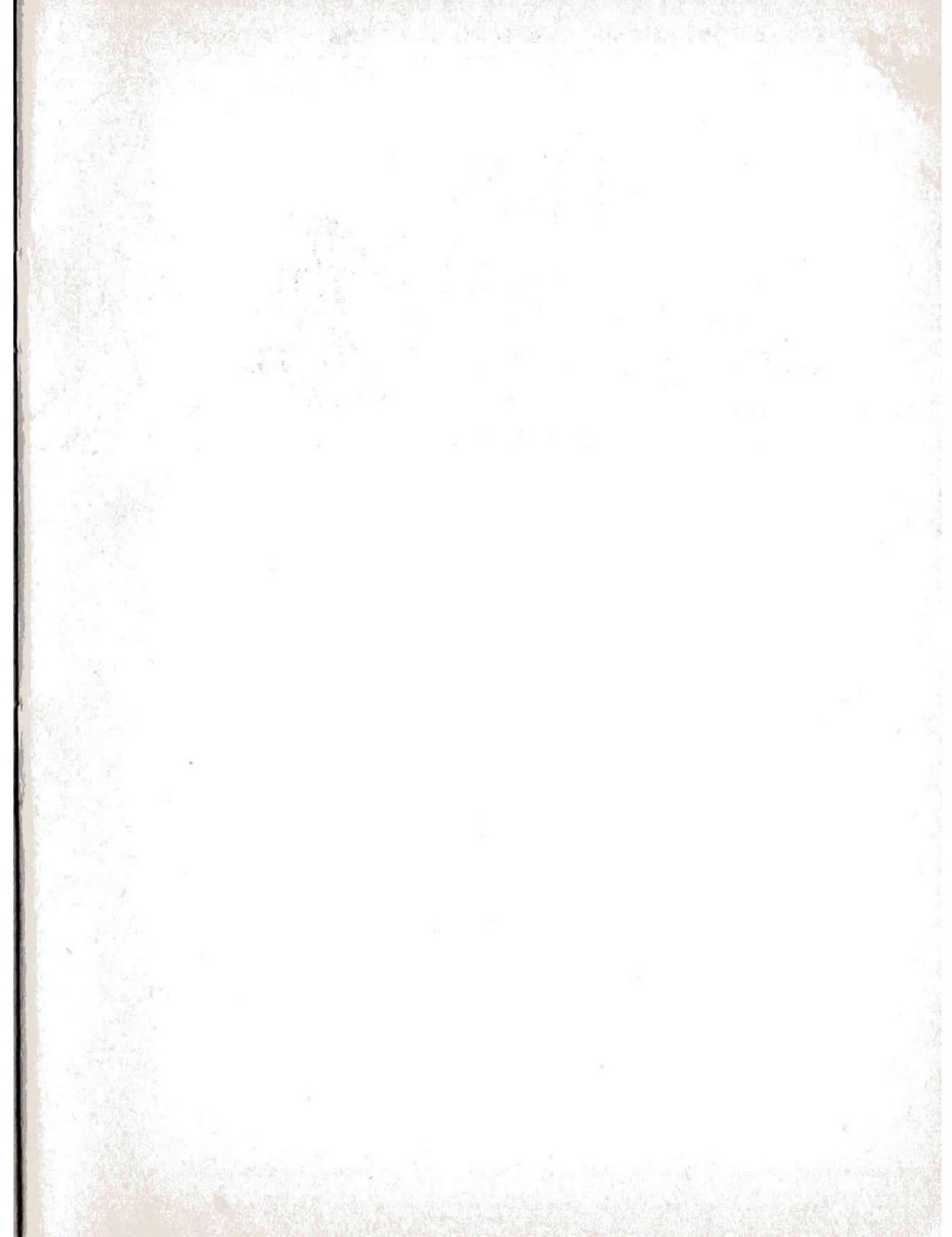
Always egotistical and excessively jealous, Adams never had been popular at any stage of his public career. But at this period he suffered great unpopularity of which he was wholly undeserving. His vanity often caused him to make small personal blunders; but in big things, he at all times acted with sound judgment, placing the welfare of his country above everything. Now he was openly derided for having wrecked the Federalist party, and it was not until years afterwards that his great usefulness to the country was fully recognized.

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**LAST DAYS** Stepping down from the president's chair, Adams returned to his home in Quincy, Massachusetts, where he lived a quiet life of retirement for the next quarter of a century. He read much, kept abreast of the times in political matters, and wrote a great deal.

Mrs. Adams was spared to him until 1818, and the relations of these two kindred spirits is as happy a chapter as there is in the long and full life of John Adams. The success of John Quincy Adams, his son, furthermore brightened the last days of the old patriot; and he lived to see that son raised to the presidency in 1825, the only time in American history that the son of a president of the United States ever achieved the same high honor.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day of July, 1826, he died at his home in Quincy. How fitting that he should pass away on the fiftieth anniversary of the independence he had done so much to secure!





## BIRTHPLACE OF JOHN ADAMS, QUINCY, MASS.

This house was built in 1681

*Presented by*

*John Hancock*  
MUTUAL  
**LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY**  
OF BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS